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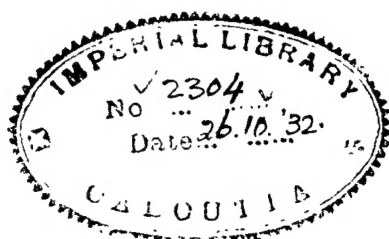
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THE CHILD

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

THE CHILD



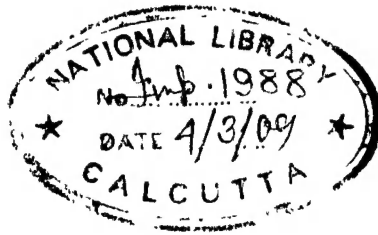
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THE CHILD

(I)

‘What of the night?’ they ask.

No answer comes.

For the blind Time gropes in a maze and knows not
its path or purpose.

The darkness in the valley stares like the dead
eye-sockets of a giant,
the clouds like a nightmare oppress the sky,
and the massive shadows lie scattered like the torn
limbs of the night.

A lurid glow waxes and wanes on the horizon,—
is it an ultimate threat from an alien star,
or an elemental hunger licking the sky?

Things are deliriously wild,
they are a noise whose grammar is a groan,
and words smothered out of shape and sense.

They are the refuse, the rejections, the fruitless failures
of life,

abrupt ruins of prodigal pride,—
fragments of a bridge over the oblivion of a vanished
stream,

godless shrines that shelter reptiles,
marble steps that lead to blankness.

Sudden tumults rise in the sky and wrestle
and a startled shudder runs along the sleepless
hours.

Are they from desperate floods
 hammering against their cave walls,
or from some fanatic storms
 whirling and howling incantations?
Are they the cry of an ancient forest
 flinging up its hoarded fire in a last extravagant
 suicide,
or screams of a paralytic crowd scourged by lunatics
 blind and deaf?
Underneath the noisy terror a stealthy hum creeps up
 like bubbling volcanic mud,
 a mixture of sinister whispers, rumours and
 slanders, and hisses of derision.
The men gathered there are vague like torn pages of
 an epic.
Groping in groups or single, their torchlight tattoos
 their faces in chequered lines, in patterns of
 frightfulness.
The maniacs suddenly strike their neighbours on
 suspicion
and a hubbub of an indiscriminate fight bursts forth
 echoing from hill to hill.
The women weep and wail,
 they cry that their children are lost in a wilderness
 of contrary paths with confusion at the end.
Others defiantly ribald shake with raucous laughter
 their lascivious limbs unshrinkingly loud,
 for they think that nothing matters.

(II)

There on the crest of the hill
 stands the Man of faith amid the snow-white
 silence,
He scans the sky for some signal of light,
and when the clouds thicken and the nightbirds
 scream as they fly,
he cries, 'Brothers, despair not, for Man is great.'
But they never heed him,
 for they believe that the elemental brute is eternal
 and goodness in its depth is darkly cunning in
 deception.
When beaten and wounded they cry, 'Brother, where
 art thou?'
The answer comes, 'I am by your side.'—
But they cannot see in the dark
 and they argue that the voice is of their own
 desperate desire,
that men are ever condemned to fight for phantoms
 in an interminable desert of mutual menace.

(III)

The clouds part, the morning star appears in the East,
a breath of relief springs up from the heart of the
earth,
the murmur of leaves ripples along the forest path,
and the early bird sings.

‘The time has come,’ proclaims the Man of faith.

‘The time for what?’

‘For the pilgrimage.’

They sit and think, they know not the meaning,
and yet they seem to understand according to their
desires.

The touch of the dawn goes deep into the soil
and life shivers along through the roots of all
things.

‘To the pilgrimage of fulfilment,’ a small voice
whispers, nobody knows whence.

Taken up by the crowd
it swells into a mighty meaning.

Men raise their heads and look up,
women lift their arms in reverence,
children clap their hands and laugh.

The early glow of the sun shines like a golden garland
on the forehead of the Man of faith,
and they all cry: ‘Brother, we salute thee!’

(IV)

Men begin to gather from all quarters,
from across the seas, the mountains and pathless
wastes,
They come from the valley of the Nile and the banks
of the Ganges,
from the snow-sunk uplands of Thibet,
from high-walled cities of glittering towers,
from the dense dark tangle of savage wilderness.
Some walk, some ride on camels, horses and elephants,
on chariots with banners vying with the clouds
of dawn,
The priests of all creeds burn incense, chanting verses
as they go.
The monarchs march at the head of their armies,
lances flashing in the sun and drums beating loud.
Ragged beggars and courtiers pompously decorated,
agile young scholars and teachers burdened with
learned age jostle each other in the crowd.
Women come chatting and laughing,
mothers, maidens and brides,
with offerings of flowers and fruit,
sandal paste and scented water.
Mingled with them is the harlot,
shrill of voice and loud in tint and tinsel.
The gossip is there who secretly poisons the well
of human sympathy and chuckles.

The maimed and the cripple join the throng with the
blind and the sick,
the dissolute, the thief and the man who makes a
trade of his God for profit and mimics the
saint.

‘The fulfilment!’

They dare not talk aloud,
but in their minds they magnify their own greed,
and dream of boundless power,
of unlimited impunity for pilfering and plunder,
and eternity of feast for their unclean gluttonous
flesh.

(V)

The Man of faith moves on along pitiless paths strewn
with flints over scorching sands and steep
mountainous tracks.

They follow him, the strong and the weak, the aged
and young,

the rulers of realms, the tillers of the soil.

Some grow weary and footsore, some angry and
suspicious.

They ask at every dragging step,

‘How much further is the end?’

The Man of faith sings in answer;

they scowl and shake their fists and yet they cannot
resist him;

the pressure of the moving mass and indefinite
hope push them forward.

They shorten their sleep and curtail their rest,

they out-vie each other in their speed,

they are ever afraid lest they may be too late for their
chance

while others be more fortunate.

The days pass,

the ever-receding horizon tempts them with renewed
lure of the unseen till they are sick.

Their faces harden, their curses grow louder and
louder.

(VI)

It is night.

The travellers spread their mats on the ground
under the banyan tree.

A gust of wind blows out the lamp
and the darkness deepens like a sleep into a swoon.
Someone from the crowd suddenly stands up
and pointing to the leader with merciless finger
breaks out:

‘False prophet, thou hast deceived us!’

Others take up the cry one by one,
women hiss their hatred and men growl.

At last one bolder than others suddenly deals him a
blow.

They cannot see his face, but fall upon him in a fury
of destruction
and hit him till he lies prone upon the ground his
life extinct.

The night is still, the sound of the distant waterfall
comes muffled,
and a faint breath of jasmine floats in the air

(VII)

The pilgrims are afraid.

The women begin to cry, the men in an agony of
wretchedness

shout at them to stop.

Dogs break out barking and are cruelly whipped into
silence broken by moans.

The night seems endless and men and women begin to
wrangle as to who among them was to blame.

They shriek and shout and as they are ready
to unsheathe their knives

the darkness pales, the morning light overflows
the mountain tops.

Suddenly they become still and gasp for breath as they
gaze at the figure lying dead.

The women sob out loud and men hide their faces in
their hands.

A few try to slink away unnoticed,
but their crime keeps them chained
to their victim.

They ask each other in bewilderment,
‘Who will show us the path?’

The old man from the East bends his head and says:
‘The Victim.’

They sit still and silent.

Again speaks the old man,

‘We refused him in doubt, we killed him in anger,
now we shall accept him in love,
for in his death he lives in the life of us all, the
great Victim.’
And they all stand up and mingle their voices and sing,
‘Victory to the Victim.’

(VIII)

‘To the pilgrimage’ calls the young,
 ‘to love, to power, to knowledge, to wealth
 overflowing,’
‘We shall conquer the world and the world beyond
 this,’
 they all cry exultant in a thundering cataract of
 voices,
The meaning is not the same to them all, but only the
 impulse,
 the moving confluence of wills that recks not death
 and disaster.
No longer they ask for their way,
 no more doubts are there to burden their minds
 or weariness to clog their feet.
The spirit of the Leader is within them and ever
 beyond them—
the Leader who has crossed death and all limits.
They travel over the fields where the seeds are sown,
 by the granary where the harvest is gathered,
and across the barren soil where famine dwells
 and skeletons cry for the return of their flesh.
They pass through populous cities humming with
 life,
 through dumb desolation hugging its ruined past,
 and hovels for the unclad and unclean,
 a mockery of home for the homeless.

They travel through long hours of the summer day,
and as the light wanes in the evening they ask
the man who reads the sky:
‘Brother, is yonder the tower of our final hope
and peace?’
The wise man shakes his head and says:
‘It is the last vanishing cloud of the sunset.’
‘Friends,’ exhorts the young, ‘do not stop.
Through the night’s blindness we must struggle
into the Kingdom of living light.’
They go on in the dark.
The road seems to know its own meaning
and dust underfoot dumbly speaks of direction.
The stars—celestial wayfarers—sing in silent chorus:
‘Move on, comrades!’
In the air floats the voice of the Leader:
‘The goal is nigh.’

(IX)

The first flush of dawn glistens on the dew-dripping
leaves of the forest.

The man who reads the sky cries:

‘Friends, we have come!’

They stop and look around.

On both sides of the road the corn is ripe to the
horizon,

—the glad golden answer of the earth to the
morning light.

The current of daily life moves slowly

between the village near the hill and the one
by the river bank.

The potter’s wheel goes round, the woodcutter brings
fuel to the market,

the cow-herd takes his cattle to the pasture,
and the woman with the pitcher on her head
walks to the well.

But where is the King’s castle, the mine of gold,
the secret book of magic,

the sage who knows love’s utter wisdom?

‘The stars cannot be wrong,’ assures the reader of the sky.

‘Their signal points to that spot.’

And reverently he walks to a wayside spring
from which wells up a stream of water, a liquid light,
like the morning melting into a chorus of tears
and laughter.

Near it in a palm grove surrounded by a strange hush
stands a leaf-thatched hut,
at whose portal sits the poet of the unknown shore, and
sings:
 'Mother, open the gate!'

(X)

A ray of morning sun strikes aslant at the door.
The assembled crowd feel in their blood the primæval
chant of creation:

‘Mother, open the gate!’

The gate opens.

The mother is seated on a straw bed with the babe on
her lap,

Like the dawn with the morning star.

The sun’s ray that was waiting at the door outside
falls on the head of the child.

The poet strikes his lute and sings out:

‘Victory to Man, the new-born, the ever-living.’

They kneel down,—the king and the beggar, the saint
and the sinner,

the wise and the fool,—and cry:

‘Victory to Man, the new-born, the ever-living.’

The old man from the East murmurs to himself:

‘I have seen!’

BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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